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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWEANS ON THE EDGE OF A BREAKDOWN: THE VIEW
FROM BULAWAYO

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Dell for reasons 1.5 b/d

Summary

¶1. (C) During a May 2-3 visit to Bulawayo, Ambassador Dell met with both factions of the MDC, an activist organization, and a local economist. MDC anti-Senate faction Vice-President Thokozani Khupe argued that Zimbabweans were ready for mass peaceful action but needed to see the opposition taking the lead. By contrast, pro-Senate MDC official Abednico Bhebhe said the public's mood was not yet right for mass demonstrations. Women of Zimbabwe Arise! (WOZA) representatives said they were planning a series of demonstrations to protest increased school fees. Economic observer Eric Bloch predicted that Zimbabweans' restlessness over their economic struggles would lead President Mugabe to step down sooner rather than later. End summary.

Anti-Senate Faction MDC: We Must Lead the People

¶2. (C) On May 3, anti-Senate faction Vice President Thokozani Khupe said Zimbabweans had reached the boiling point, especially in the rural areas, and would participate in civic action if led properly. If they saw the anti-Senate faction's leaders taking to the streets themselves, the people would be emboldened to act. She said people stopped her in the streets daily and asked when the faction was going to begin the peaceful resistance discussed at the faction's Congress. Khupe emphasized that lack of resources was an obstacle to the faction's plans but noted that if the MDC failed to act, spontaneous protests could erupt instead that would bring pressure on the GOZ.

13. (C) Khupe maintained that many in the security forces were tired of the system and secretly supported the opposition. They had told the faction's leaders that they were forced to take action against small demonstrations. However, if thousands or hundreds of thousands appeared at a demonstration the security forces could tell their superiors that they had been overwhelmed and there would be no arrests or beatings of demonstrators.

14. (C) Khupe added that supporters of the pro-Senate MDC faction were coming back to the anti-Senate MDC faction slowly. Some were embarrassed to switch positions. Others were intimidated by Welshman Ncube or felt they owed him their allegiance. However, bit-by-bit, the pro-Senate faction was being hollowed out. Civil society, too, was wholeheartedly embracing the anti-Senate faction, including groups that had experience with civil action, such as the National Constitutional Assembly and WOZA, churches, and labor.

Pro-Senate Faction MDC: We Must Educate the People

15. (C) On May 3, Abednico Bhebhe, MP for Nkayi and Shadow Minister for Transport and Communications of the pro-Senate faction of the MDC, told the Ambassador that times were worsening for people but they were still unwilling to stand up for themselves. He said the mood of the people was not yet ripe for mass demonstrations. It was the role of his faction to educate the people in their civic rights so that they could take the lead in protesting the current regime.

HARARE 00000553 002 OF 003

16. (C) The Ambassador asked how the faction planned on conducting this civic education. Bhebhe said that public elected officials should use their positions and the party's political structures in their constituencies to spread information about civic rights. This, rather than the anti-Senate MDC's announcement of its intention to conduct mass action at public rallies, was the way to convince the people to take the initiative.

The Activists' Take

17. (C) On May 3, the Ambassador met with members of WOZA, an activist group primarily composed of women, which holds regular demonstrations on a range of issues affecting ordinary Zimbabweans. WOZA leader Jenni Williams and several of WOZA's members agreed that Zimbabweans, especially those in the rural areas, were at the breaking point. Uniformed soldiers were moving into the rural areas and running their own agricultural areas, making life very difficult for the residents in the area. Rural people were finding it increasingly difficult to get food.

18. (C) The group described planned marches in Bulawayo and Harare to protest increased fees at government schools. Williams said she did not expect interference from Bulawayo's security forces, which were also unhappy about the fee increases. (N.B. In the event, police did arrest demonstrators in Bulawayo but not in Harare). The women also noted an increasing number of men attending WOZA meetings and wanting to participate in its activities.

19. (C) The Ambassador asked about WOZA's interactions with the MDC factions. Williams responded that WOZA supported the opposition but had a specific aim, to empower women and to enable the position of ordinary women on issues affecting their daily survival to be heard. Therefore, WOZA would continue to do its own work, independent of other organizations.

Economist's Perspective

¶10. (C) On May 2, respected local economic commentator Eric Bloch told the Ambassador the country's economic meltdown was reaching a critical point. The Ambassador asked Bloch if RBZ President Gideon Gono (whom Bloch knows well) had been deliberately making mistakes in his attempts to influence economic policy. Bloch attributed Gono's blunders to naivete and impetuosity. He said Gono had made enemies of several powerful figures in the ruling party and was only saved by his strong support from President Mugabe.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked Bloch how long the economy could last under such mismanagement and if it could ever recover. Bloch replied that Zimbabweans had been willing to put up with lack of fuel and long lines for food but were now seeing their children go hungry, a situation that was likely to prod them into action. Longer-term, however, Bloch expressed optimism noting that mineral wealth, good industrial infrastructure, a desirable geographic position, and the possible revitalization of tourism and commercial agriculture all provided hope that the economy could recover given the right policies.

¶12. (C) Bloch added, however, that the current regime was likely incapable of adopting the right economic policies. In that regard, he claimed to have heard that Mugabe was planning his exit from the Presidency. Bloch speculated

HARARE 00000553 003 OF 003

that Mugabe would explain his retirement to the public by saying that he had completed his work for the people of Zimbabwe and would now need time to work on his other goals, such as writing his memoirs. However, the reality was that Mugabe could not bring himself to make policy changes and feared the possibility of mass uprisings brought on by economic decline.

Comment

¶13. (C) Much is often made of differences between the Ndebele minority-dominated Matabeleland and the rest of the country, but all share at least one common denominator -- the extent to which they are fed up with the regime's mismanagement of the economy. Still, whether Zimbabweans act on that growing disgust and resentment continues to hinge in part on key variables referred to in the Ambassador's exchanges: opposition leadership, security forces' loyalties, and the pace of economic decline, among other things. Unspoken by the interlocutors is the need for a spark, some event to snap everybody here out of their superhuman tolerance for long-worsening conditions with no meaningful hope for respite.

DELL